

# Mother tongue and learning in migrant households

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## Abstract

*The extent to which the children in migrant households acquire proficiency in the new language of their destination and in their heritage language strongly conditions their well-being and their success in the country's educational institutions. In this paper, i will exhibit how language practices by Moroccans (globally the North African) parents, attitudes towards the heritage language and French language, affect children's development and the children's success in the country's educational. I will discuss how immigrant families are losing their heritage languages faster simply due to limited opportunities to read their own languages. And finally, i will show how my mother tongue books can help parents to explain natural phenomena, to discover sciences, to learn civic acts or to express ideas and emotions to their children. All those skills are lost when a child have not access to books in their mother tongue.*

**Keywords:** Immigrant integration, Second-language acquisition, School reform, Darija, Moroccan language, North African language.

## I. INTRODUCTION

As reported in the OECD's PISA survey of 2015, the proportion of low-achieving migrant students exceeds that of native-born students in most participating European countries, even when socio-economic status is controlled for (OECD, 2016). Similarly, according to the latest Eurostat data of Migrant integration statistics - education <sup>1</sup>, the rate of foreign-born students leaving education and training early is higher than the rate of the native-born population in almost all European countries for which data is available.

Minimising any potentially adverse impact of students' immigrant background on their

outcomes at school is an imperative for achieving equity in education. So, if we want to 'make the most of migration', a detailed knowledge of migrants' education and skill levels, how they differ from those of the natives, becomes essential. Accordingly, tackling migrant students' lower educational outcomes and their retention in the education system is reported as a main policy challenge in 17 education systems across Europe. <sup>2</sup>.

the report of the european commission has analysed the top-level policies and measures of ten education systems on matters directly related to the integration into schools of students from migrant backgrounds. These include the initial assessment of newly arrived migrant students' knowledge and skills, the teaching and learning of the language of instruction

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<sup>1</sup>Eurostat tweet : Among people aged 18–24 years living in the EU, 8.4% of nationals were early leavers from education and training. This share was notably higher among citizens of other EU Member States (23.3%) and higher still among non-EU citizens (26.0 %).

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<sup>2</sup>European commission, Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe National Policies and Measures, December 2018

and home language(s), the development of students' academic as well as social and emotional skills, the provision of intercultural education, the support given to teachers and school heads, and the involvement of parents and the wider school community.

But, home language as a resource for individuals is valued for "bigger" languages such as English, French and German (Durk Gorter and Jasone Cenoz, 2011), but not for a "small" language such as Darija (Moroccan vernacular Arabic). And there is an obvious reason for this.

On the one hand, the monolingual paradigm is a legacy of the nation-building process (Busch, 2011), and in this context, education systems are still key players in promoting this "bigger" common language across the country.

On the other hand, one of the core but often missed factors on the difficulty of learning in a "small" language is the availability of learning resources. On top of that, it is also difficult to find resources even in the country the language is spoken in (Like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia).

In this case, how can I get over the lack of the resources ?

I hope that my empirical evidence of the usefulness of solving the lack of "small" language resources will be useful as a basis for education, migration and integration policies.

## II. ISSUE

PISA classifies students into several categories according to their immigrant background and that of their parents :

**Non-immigrant students** are students whose mother or father (or both) was/were born in the country where they sat the PISA test, regardless of whether the student himself or herself was born in that country. These students are also referred to as "students without an immigrant background".

**Immigrant students** are students whose mother and father were both born in a country other than that where the student sat the

PISA test. These students are also referred to as "students with an immigrant background".

The question is : What is the linguistic reality of parents from Morocco (or North Africa) ?

For instance according to the general monographic report of the Tangier-Tetouan-Al hoceima region: 8.2% of the population of this region speak Tarifit (an Amazigh language) and 91.8% speak Darija (the Moroccan Arabic dialect).

However, Darija does not have the status of an official language, it remains a fairly stigmatized language ("small" language in Morocco too). Darija is the result of the interpenetration of : Literary Arabic, the various Berber dialects, French and, to a lesser extent, Spanish.(Laroui, 2011, p. 67).

Ibn khaldoun says about this language <sup>3</sup> : In Ifriqiyah and the Maghrib, the Arabs had contact with the non-Arab Berbers who constitute the bulk of the population.... The entire urban population of those zones came to speak another language, one peculiar to them and different from the language of the Mudar... In a way, it was another language (and no longer Arabic), in as much as the habit of it became firmly rooted among those people (in Spain).

And effectively nowadays Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians or Libyans (people from the Maghreb region) can't understand the language of the Mudar (Literary Arabic) if they don't learned it in school.

All this gives an idea of the linguistic reality of parents from Morocco (globally the Maghreb region), and i hope it serves to better know the mother tongue of their children enrolled in the primary cycles of the French education system.

For instance, in France, the Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer announced that he wanted to strengthen the learning of the Arabic language at school. This is not the Darija mother tongue, but Literary Arabic.<sup>4</sup>

Or, when asked about the government's desire to "strengthen the learning of Arabic at

<sup>3</sup>The Muqaddimah, Abd Ar Rahman bin Muhammed ibn Khaldun Translated by Franz Rosenthal, page 758.

<sup>4</sup>blogs.mediapart.fr : L'arabe: Blanquer dans les pas de Najat Vallaud-Belkacem? Et bis repetita?

school", Gérald Darmanin, Minister of the Interior confided:

"When I was a child, my friends, children of housekeeper like me and from Portuguese or Spanish families, learned the language of their parents at school. But my cousins of North African origin only had the mosque to learn Arabic... Is that what we want? »<sup>5</sup>. Again, This is not the Darija mother tongue, but Literary Arabic.

If there is one reason that should be considered the main one when thinking about the language to be used in school, it would be to become aware of which is the mother tongue that the child recognizes as his own as soon as he is in his mother's womb.

In Spain, on January 3, 2013, journalist Luis Manuel Aznar said in an article in the newspaper *El Faro Digital*, published in the Autonomous City of Ceuta, the following: The government delegate, Francisco Antonio González Pérez, is very clear that it is a serious mistake to induce the introduction of Darija in the school community, "because it is not even a language" [...] "for a language to be one, if they must give two components: phonetics and syntax. The first has it, but the second no, it is not written".

The linguist Francisco Moscoso Garcia says : González Pérez seems ill-advised on this subject. To a linguist, philologist, or moderately interested person, these words creak. To say that "(Darija) of Ceuta is not a language" is to misunderstand the linguistic system, even if it is not officially codified and however small its number of speakers, 42% of the population of Ceuta according to data from the Department of Education, Culture and Women of the Autonomous City of Ceuta."

The precise implications of different approaches to mother tongue support have been the subject of much ongoing research <sup>6</sup>

Many parents begin reading to their chil-

dren shortly after birth<sup>7</sup>, so this is potentially an important source of linguistic and knowledge input for many children. Young children whose parents read them five books a day enter kindergarten having heard about 1.4 million more words<sup>8</sup> than kids who were never read to, a new study found. This 'million word gap' could be one key in explaining differences in vocabulary and reading development.

From birth, babies and children are gathering skills they'll use in reading. The years between ages 3 and 5 are critical to reading growth, and some 5-year-olds are already in kindergarten. Cognitive competence encompasses the skills and capacities needed at each age and stage of development to succeed in school and in the world at large. Children's cognitive competence is defined by skills in language and communication, as well as reading, writing, and problem solving.

In one hand, the immigrant parent would speak to his child in the language he feels most comfortable in because that way he can give them really rich language exposure. If the immigrant parent try to speak to his child just in French, they won't get that same richness of language they would get if he was speaking to them in a language he isn't more fluent in.

The use of the North African's heritage language, on the other hand, is limited both in quantitative and qualitative terms: it is typically used at home with few speakers on topics concerning the everyday routine, and few books are available in their mother tongue. Ameziane says that "Arabic books are poorly adapted to the language level of Moroccan children. Moroccan publications for children are few, The cultural heritage of stories and songs for children is rich, but oral and unfortunately not transcribed." [?, ?].

And I can add that the scientific, technical and literary knowledge for children is poor, since it is neither oral nor written in Darija.

<sup>5</sup>leparisien.fr : Enseignement de l'arabe à l'école : cinq questions sur une polémique

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, W.; Collier, P; A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students Long-Term Academic Achievement

<sup>7</sup>parents.com : The Benefits of Reading to Your Baby

<sup>8</sup>A 'million word gap' for children who aren't read to at home That's how many fewer words some may hear by kindergarten, Date: April 4, 2019.iginal written by Jeff Grabmeier.

**Table 1:** Books in "Darija"

For bigenners	
themes	Year
Classical physics	2009
Electronics fundamentals	2011
Maths in Marrakesh Museum	2013
For youth moroccans	2018
Architecture, Kutubia and Giralda	2018

**Table 2:** Mini-Books in "Darija"

For bigenners	
themes	Year
Solar System Coloring	2019
Moon phases	2019
Simple Machines	2019
Insects	2019
Insect classes	2020
Constellations 1	2020
Constellations 2	2021
Electricity, The basics of circuits	2021
Electricity Electromagnet	2021
Electricity light and wind power	2022
Coding thru Pixel Art	2022

### III. OUTLET

Some immigrant parents from North Africa (The Maghreb region) try to solve this problem of resources by reading in others languages, like classical Arabic, a third language especially used in religious matter, or French, the language of their destination, especially used for modern knowledge.

But, I think it's important for immigrants parents to speak their mother tongues at home without worrying about their child learning French or classical Arabic, whether for modern knowledge or religious purpose.

Parents from North Africa must be able to read to their children books in mother tongue shortly after birth, they must have access to books for discovery, sciences, history and all the knowledge a child under 5 needs.

Young children learn language from the speech they hear. But on top of limited opportunities to speak the language, topics concerning the everyday routine of children, immigrants don't always have books in their mother tongue, whereas one potential source of lexical<sup>9</sup> diversity is the text of picture books that parents read aloud to children.

As an immigrant from North Africa, i started to produce such books in my own mother tongue which is called "Darija".

So, i started producing scientific e.books<sup>10</sup> in "Darija", "Derja" or "Arabe Ceuti" in 2009,

<sup>9</sup>source : The Words Children Hear: Picture Books and the Statistics for Language Learning Jessica L. Montag, Michael N. Jones, Linda B. Smith

<sup>10</sup>medias24.com : Une premiere un marocain redige des manuels scientifiques en darija/

books understandable by all North Africans. Everyone can download those e.books from Academia.edu<sup>11</sup> or Archive.org<sup>12</sup>.

After that, i started producing mini-books (8 pages) made from an A4 sheet.

These books were designed to help children learn by reading everywhere cheaply<sup>13</sup>. For-teen mini-books available to everyone with the link drive<sup>14</sup>, The series starts with the alphabet and ends with mini-books about insects, maths, astronomy, programming, electronics, mechanics.

In figure 1, three mini-books were colored posted on Facebook by the daughter of a Moroccan parent in France. The top one deals with insects, the right one deals with simple machines and finally the left one deals with constellations.

I also translated a video about the development of the Maltese language, a recognized European language, which many North Africans understand perfectly since it looks like Darija. This video seen 100,000 times, and commented 500 times to express the closeness of this lan-

<sup>11</sup><https://independent.academia.edu/FaroukElmerrakchi>

<sup>12</sup><https://archive.org/details/@elmerrakchi>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.barlamane.com/fr/farouk-el-merrakchi-contes-des-histoires-en-darija-qui-vulgarisent-les-sciences-et-leurs-concepts/>

<sup>14</sup>[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1qztj\\_TU4ptpJ2-HrwkQeR8-GtsWayx0?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1qztj_TU4ptpJ2-HrwkQeR8-GtsWayx0?usp=sharing)



Figure 1: Colored mini-books by a child.

guage with Darija.<sup>15</sup>

Today, I continue to produce another mini-books to help North African parents to be able to read and learn knowledge with their children in their mother tongue.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Bilinguals are not merely able to express an idea in two languages, they also have the opportunity to be immersed in two cultures. When i start writing the first scientific book who deals with physics, the problem i encountered was the lack of vocabulary first, then the second one was the meanings of words and the meaning of relationships among words.

##### i. Lexicon issue

In mini-book who deals with planets, the first planet that i want to exhibit was Mercury. The first issue was the fact that i don't know the name of this planet in Darija. I notice that i have not a word in my mother tongue of the planet Mercury neither others planets.

Whereas i know it in Arabic language which is "Otarid" means "Fast running", and i know also in French language which is "Mercure", the planet was so named by the Romans because of the speed at which it moves in the sky.

I decide to search for a word which exist in Darija but never used in Astronomy, the word that i found is "Zawaq", in Darija, when we say "hada dayr bhal a Zawaq" means that person is hyperactive, also the translation of the chemical element Mercury commonly known as quicksilver in Darija is "Zawaq".

Sometimes i don't find any word in Darija because it is an oral language and i don't know every words.

In this way, i think we can build a reference language in which metalinguistic activities would be developed through reading and writing for children. Whereas, when reading is absent, prior metalinguistic skills may not be sufficient to analyze the second language, which will be learned through the linguistic screens of the first.

##### ii. Semantic issue

While our language can help us communicate with others, there are things that can get in the way of this process. For instane : on topics concerning the everyday routine, Morrocans parrents says to children the sentence : "Andak yderbek a Doww" means "watch out for **electricity**", says also to children : "chael a Doww" means "turn on the **light**".

I notice that in Darija, we use the same word for two scientific concepts which is a source of confusion for children.

In my book "Doww nishane" which deals with electricity, I solved this problem by distinguishing between the two concepts "light" and electricity using the terms "doww" for electricity and "cha'a" for light.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In this article, I explained what Darija is and defended its identity as a language in itself

<sup>15</sup>Youtube : Farouk Elmerrakchi: Ilsien Il-Malti

and as a language of several European states. It is a language which is characterized above all by borrowings from the French or Spanish language.

It is a heritage that must be protected and safeguarded by the authorities to help build a fairer and more democratic society.

In this way, the mother tongue would be proposed as a necessary pedagogical instrument which would support, together with other measures, the educational promotion of the children of immigrants.

Ans can allow children to:

- Gain exposure to language other than destination language;
- Develop awareness of language diversity;
- Increase their understanding of world diversity;
- Clarify misconceptions they may have developed about various cultures.

It is indeed in the absence of a reference language in the family environment, which does not allow the emergence of a reference language in children, that we find one explanatory key to the early school difficulties of children of immigrant origin.

I think if you have those conditions then people are more likely to share their own language or to be more proud of their own language and to have those chances to keep the language alive. And it give further generations opportunities to speak their heritage languages more regularly.

[FRANCISCO MOSCOSO GARCÍA]

GARCÍA, 2013

EL ÁRABE CEUTÍ, UNA LENGUA MINORIZADA DE ESPAÑA

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